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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000101

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Five things that upset Sinhalese extremists

Refs: Colombo 90, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

SUMMARY

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[¶1.](#) (C) Always a lively crowd, Sri Lanka's Sinhalese extremists have been raising a ruckus over five issues of late. They have demanded, for example, that (#1) the Norwegian Ambassador be expelled from the country, and complained about (#2) a pro-Tamil movie that opened in Europe recently and (#3) a BBC poll that gave pride of place to a Tamil nationalist song. Constructing strawmen, they are also demanding that no effort be made to change (#4) the flag or (#5) the national anthem as part of the peace process. Although their anti-peace process tirades have generated little impact thus far, the extremists' use of these five issues highlights how they continue to nibble away at the margins of the body politic. END SUMMARY.

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Issue #1: The Norwegian Ambassador

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[¶2.](#) (SBU) In addition to their usual anti-peace process tirades, Sri Lanka's Sinhalese extremists have been raising a ruckus lately on five peace-related issues. (Note: FYI. About 75 percent of Sri Lankans belong to the Sinhalese ethnic group, which is mostly Buddhist. Sinhalese extremist groups maintain the support of somewhere over 10 percent of the total body politic.) One of the issues that has them up in arms is Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg, who they want kicked out of the country. They charge that Westborg illegally allowed the Norwegian Embassy to import radio equipment for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a diplomatic consignment. (Note: In fact, the Norwegian Embassy did this only at the specific request of the government's Peace Secretariat. This issue has prompted a recent exchange of letters among the GSL, President Kumaratunga, and the GoN -- see Reftels. End Note.)

[¶3.](#) (C) Upping the pressure in a January 13 press statement, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party demanded that Westborg leave the country immediately. If this did not happen, it threatened to launch an "agitation" campaign against him. Commenting on the situation, Tarunjit Sandhu, polchief at the Indian High Commission, told us that this was quite a "threat" against Westborg, given the JVP's proven ability to raise a crowd. (Note: The radical JVP, the country's largest Sinhalese extremist party, has thousands of disciplined cadre, including many from its lively labor union wing.) More generally, Sandhu thought that the JVP's anti-Westborg invective was an attempt to ramp up its long-standing campaign to undermine the Norwegian government peace facilitation effort, which the JVP (and other Sinhalese extremists) consider pro-LTTE.

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#2 & #3: Anger over a Movie and a Song

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[¶4.](#) (SBU) Another issue that has the extremists spun up involves a movie called "In the Name of the Buddha," which apparently opened in Oslo recently and is now showing in the UK. (Note: The movie was reportedly filmed mostly in the UK by Sri Lankan Tamils.) From what Mission understands (we have not seen it), the movie takes a pro-Tamil slant on the Sri Lankan conflict, accusing the GSL's security forces of committing widespread human rights abuses. In a decidedly heavy-handed and inflammatory linkage, the figure of the Buddha is reportedly super-imposed on a Tamil cemetery at one point in the movie.

[¶5.](#) (SBU) The showing of the movie in the UK has garnered widespread negative publicity in Sri Lanka. In particular, it has enraged the JVP and the Sihala Urumaya (SU), another extremist political party. Both parties have publicly demanded that the GSL work to

ensure that the movie is no longer shown. In reaction to the JVP and SU protests, as well as those of some Buddhist groups which call the movie "blasphemous," Sri Lankan High Commissioner in London Faiz Mustapha has complained to the British Foreign Office and other HMG ministries. This effort has been to no avail inasmuch as the movie is apparently still being shown.

**16.** (SBU) Extremists are also angered over the results of a recent poll on a BBC website. The poll, which asked people to register their favorite songs of all time, listed the Tamil-language song "Poovum Nadakkuthu, Pinchum Nadakkuthu" at the number five slot. A rough translation of the (rather prosaic) title is "Even the children are displaced, the children are not spared." The song is strongly pro-Tamil and anti-GSL, and recites an account of Tamils being displaced due to an attack by the Sri Lankan military. Similar to the uproar against "In the Name of the Buddha," the song has served to stir up Sinhalese extremists, who have demanded that the song be taken off the BBC website. According to press accounts, Mustapha was reportedly ordered by the Foreign Minister to study the text of the song as the first step before the possible launching of an official protest by the GSL against it. In response to the attention, the BBC has stated that the poll was open to the public on its website and it just published the results. (Note: The "top ten" list was extremely eclectic: the number one song is called "A Nation Once Again" by the Wolfe Tones and the number eight song is "Believe" by Cher.)

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#4 & #5: The Flag and the National Anthem

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**17.** (SBU) The JVP and SU have also criticized the government heatedly for allegedly trying to change the flag and national anthem. Both parties accuse the GSL of maintaining a "secret plan" to adjust the flag and the anthem so that they represent a more cosmopolitan nation and not primarily a Sinhalese Buddhist one. (Note: The Sri Lankan flag is dominated by a lion, which is a symbol of Sinhalese Buddhists. The national anthem is also rich in Sinhalese Buddhist associations.) In a letter to the Minister of Cultural Affairs, the SU also accused the GSL of trying to re-do the anthem to "suit the so-called proposed federal state." (Note: In the ongoing GSL-LTTE peace talks, both sides are discussing transforming the constitution and making it federalist in structure, as opposed to unitary.)

**18.** (C) In a recent conversation about the JVP and SU complaints, Kethesh Loganathan of the Center for Policy Alternatives, a well-known local NGO, told us that both parties were creating strawmen. He noted that there had been some discussion "over drinks" in academic circles of these issues, including whether the country's name, "Sri Lanka" (a name rich in Sinhalese associations), should be changed back to the more neutral "Ceylon." Nonetheless, there was no "secret plan" by the government to change the flag and anthem, and he doubted that there was any intention to do so.

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COMMENT

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**19.** (C) Tirades by Sinhalese extremists against the peace process seem to have generated little support for their cause, thus far. The extremists' use of the five issues reviewed above, however, highlights how they continue to nibble away at the margins of the body politic. It is unclear whether their constant attacks and forays into cultural nationalism are having an effect at the village level in the Sinhalese hinterland in the south. If they are, it is possible that the extremists could be putting themselves in position to make political gains if the peace process hits a stumbling block. At this point, however, with the process still buoyed by widespread public support, the JVP and SU remain decidedly on the outside looking in despite their best efforts. END COMMENT.

**110.** (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS